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ABSTRACT

The very rich variety of truly rare and desirable materials held by the Sam Houston State University library is quite frequently a literal embarrassment because so often there is no time, money, space or skilled personnel necessary to develop them adequately. The problem lies, in part, in the indiscriminate acceptance of too varied materials. (Author/SJ)

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AN EMBARRASSMENT OF RICHES:

Consideration of Special Library Materials in the Smaller Library

A Texas A&M University Library Lecture

Presented December 20, 1971

by

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When Jack suggested to me the possibility of my joining the speakers in Texas A&M's distinguished Library Lecture Series, I thought, "My word. What a falling-off in caliber from the stature of previous lecturers in the Series!" Some most distinguished people have come to this attractive conference room to address us on topics of wide-ranging interest to librarians and other book-minded people, and not just to those resident on the A&M campus.

So, let me advance a disclaimer at the very beginning: you will not be benefitting today from the wealth of knowledge and experience, the humor and understanding of an Archibald Hanna, nor from the splendid collections represented by Yale's holdings in Western Americana or by Mr. Dykes' magnificent personal collection of J. Frank Dobie. In addition, I should disabuse you of any expectation of hearing the penetrating and always strikingly candid, forthright--frequently blunt--honesty of an Ed Holley, whose loss to Texas librarianship will be keenly felt following his move to North Carolina this spring.

But, before I persuade you that it is indeed a waste of your time to be sitting here, as you might have suspected before coming, let me tell you what I wish to speak to you about; because my talk does naturally evolve out of some of the good things we have in the past heard from Dr. Hanna and Mr. Dykes and from Dr. Holley.

I suspect, that far more often than librarians are willing to admit to their local administrators, special collections of rare books, manuscripts, archives, etc., are a suppurating professional embarrassment to the libraries into which they have gravitated. For right there, in my choice of verb, is to be found one of the primary causes of the difficulties such collections present: their acquisition, so often, was not something planned to fit into an existing over-all frame having specific goals and adequate justification. Such materials come to libraries for a variety of reasons, as we all know. Few of us see the deliberate, planned acquisition of a Coe or a Streeter Collection. You will remember the fascinating anecdotes Dr. Hanna told us of Yale's cultivation of patrons: the dickering, the marvelous one-upmanship of "nailing" the prospective patron through leading him to identify personally, both himself and his collection, with the recipient library--processes that frequently required years of thoughtful, intelligent study of the patron's likes, prejudices, quirks, blind spots and enthusiasms.

Far too seldom does any of us benefit from the receipt of an organized, bibliographically controlled collection such as our hosts today have recently acquired from Mr. Dykes. It strikes me as something that deserves to be stated, as a candid admission of fact, that far too often such unglamorous factors as physical space, trained personnel, valid academic course offerings, and a research-minded faculty are not considered <u>before</u> the collection comes to the institution. I have honest doubts that a smaller institution such as my own should be permitted, so to speak, to receive such a collection as Mr. Dykes' collection of Dobie. Of course, I would leap at the chance--were it offered to us. But that underlines the point of my previous statement: I suspect that all kinds and sorts of

valuable materials are squirrelled-away all over this state, in places where the scholar can never find them, should he ever hear of them.

I am trying here to disassociate myself as a professional librarian from my daily function as the librarian of a specific institution. As the latter, I certainly am going to accept collections offered to our library with pleasure and glad appreciation. And I will likely justify my actions by reference to that hazy future time when "we will be able to develop these materials properly."

Recently, I have been forced to plan the walling-off of some space by a chain-link fence down through a section of our Archives/Documents Room. In my attempt to plan this move, it was an obvious necessity that I look into all those bits and dabs of "Rare" or "Special Collections" materials that are now found in many different locations on four levels of the building. My professional conscience was appalled! I had no idea there were so many. Guilt rose up in me at the memory of Helen Wheat's resigned sadness at the prospect of still another shelf list for still another special situation. To illustrate, I have itemized them for you: the University Archives, the Bates Collection, the Clark Collection, the Porter Collection, the Shettles Collection, the Special Authors Collection, the Texas Collection remaining in Dewey numbers, the Twain Collection, the Thomason Collection, and the Wild Dog Collection. In addition, special temporary arrangements have been required by our having purchased the Seven Bookhunters (in the neighborhood of 50,000 volumes) and, now, the Eliasberg Collection (about 3,000 volumes).

The truth of the matter is that we cannot give these collections the attention they merit; we do not do so. We have not done so, nor can

I stand here today and say to you truthfully that we will do so in the immediate future.

Perhaps we have become a museum, to a certain extent, rather than a library that exploits these materials properly. In our beautiful new library building we have been concerned first--and properly, I think--with our bread and butter functions in support of the faculty and student body. And both the faculty and student body--as well as the curriculum--have been growing rapidly during these past four years.

So that the planned melding of the bulk of the Shettles, Clark, and Porter collections into the appropriate area of shelf item, Texas Collection, and Special Collection has proceeded very slowly, as the pressure of bread and butter acquisitions has shunted them onto a siding to await the overburdened catalogers' attentions. We are making progress, but will continue to do so quite slowly. Eventually I hope to see--in addition to the catalog--a brochure or checklist which will publicize for the benefit of scholarship the rarer items of these three collections.

In another area, the Sanford E. Bates collection has been swallowed-up by the very heavy purchases we have made to support our first doctoral program. Much of Dr. Bates' material was standard, basic works in criminology, penology, and sociology; it fitted beautifully into our subject collection. A considerable number of his works, however, deserved more recognition than that: presentation copies autographed by Eleanor Roosevelt or J. Edgar Hoover, for instance, must go to special collections. And so must a number of fragile pamphlets from the Shettles and Seven Bookhunters, titles dealing with crime and criminals from the 18th to the 20th centuries, with the trial for divorce on charges of adultery

of a British Earl before his peers The House of Lords, to an account of O. Henry in prison, written by his cell mate. These things--at this stage of our library's development, at least--will have to go behind that wire cage we are building in the Documents/Archives area. There they will at the least be preserved for the future: they may be available for use meanwhile upon demand, and they will provide a rich resource for exhibits and as supporting elements for special occasions. There also, I might add, they will be protected from the modern graduate student who plans (while he drinks a coke and smokes a cigarette) to examine a contemporary French pamphlet illustrating the construction of a guillotine on the latest Republican model. And, with William Blades, I must add, they will be protected from the working library staff member who can wreak havoc among unrecognized materials while she harries after the scent of some entirely unrelated problem.

Next to Sam Houston, I suppose Huntsville's best-known citizen was Colonel John W. Thomason, for whom we have named our Texana room. The Thomason Room bears the brunt of several layers of policy, of tradition carried over into the new building from the old Estill Library Building. We have yet to persuade one of our senior faculty members that the Rare Books Room is no longer suitable as a classroom for her course in Southwestern Literature. Twenty years ago, she set-up this course as a seminar in one corner of the Texas Room, walled-off by movable book shelves filled with Texas fiction; now she has two sections of from 30 to 45 students, and--besides--practically everything on her bibliography is available to her students on the open shelves.

Recently Mrs. Thomason has begun formal arrangements that will give us title to the Thomason materials we have guarded for her. So far, we

have counted more than 1500 drawings, water-colors, sketches, etc. done by the Colonel. But the one attendant we can justify for this room must do many other things than continue her listing of Thomason's works. Again, we will make progress, but slowly. And after Thomason materials have been properly tended to, the same must be done with th correspondence of Dr. Joseph Clark, and with the papers of previous presidents of the institution--some of which have only since our occupation of the new library come from safekeeping elsewhere to our Archives.

I submit to you that it is genuinely embarrassing when the daughter of a former president comes to use her father's papers in preparing a biography and discovers that all we know of them is that they fill two drawers of a metal filing cabinet, uncounted, uncalendered and un-usable until she spends at least a month ordering them.

What shall we do with our Mark Twain collection, acquired just before our Twain man in the English Department left Sam Houston for another campus? How do we protect a variant first edition from a university instructor who sees only five copies of the title--irrespective of states, variants, or any other of the points beloved by the tribe of Jacob Blanck? I'll answer that: we protect it--arbitrarily, suggesting that this young "scholar" apply to the Faculty Library Committee for justification of his need to use rare, rather than shelf copies.

Do you now begin to understand the choice of my title? No irony, sarcasm, nor play on words of any sort was intended by my choice. The very rich variety of truly rare and desirable materials we hold is quite frequently a literal embarrassment to us, because we have so often not yet had the time, money, space, and skilled personnel necessary to develop them adequately.

Dr. Holley caught my ear when he spoke to us here in this room about the "critical mass"--borrowing a term from the nuclear physicists and referring to decentralizing libraries after their holdings reach a certain volume. I suspect that the kind of embarrassments I have described today occur on the near side of a library's attaining the "critical mass" at which it's collections, personnel, physical equipment, skills, etc. become self-generating. Perhaps we err in three ways when we acquire too many good things before we can properly exploit them. Perhaps we gratefully accept far too broad a range of materials to be developed and supplemented adequately from the limited resources available to us. I think this indiscriminate acceptance of too varied materials probably leads to the situation I refer to as an inadequately maintained museum.

We may err also when we fail to build to those strong areas of our "bread and butter" collections. At this stage of my own institution's academic development, it is hard to justify such a plum as our Mark Twain collection--even though it was such a good buy that the dealer has since offered us a profit to sell it back to him! At our present stage of growth, it must be seen as a deferred value; an excellent buy, and one that we may honestly expect to grow up to in time. It is the nature of librarians to conserve today against development and full utilization in the future. Having such a gem right now affords certain peripheral values, granted; but I, for one, would not wish to see them cost accounted. I suspect those values might be found quite expensively purchased.

And, finally, perhaps we err (and my talk today may very well illustrate the error) through simple-minded impatience; perhaps the only

proper way to develop a great collection is to do so slowly, solidly, and--above all--patiently.

On that note, let me thank you for the patience you have shown in listening to my views today.